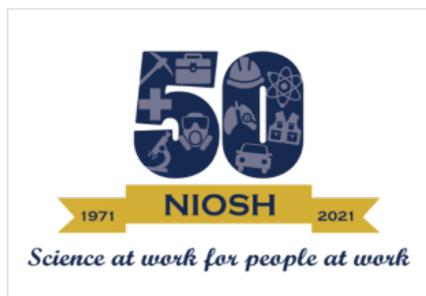




NIOSH Science Blog

Workers Memorial Day 2021: Recognizing NIOSH's First 50 Years

Posted on April 28, 2021 by John Howard, MD



Workers Memorial Day is recognized every year on April 28. It is a day established to honor workers injured or killed on the job, while reaffirming our commitment to safe and healthy workplaces for all. This date is also the anniversary of the date the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSH Act) of 1970 went into effect, a law signed by President Nixon in December of 1970. The OSH Act started the process of establishing the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), which would open its doors officially on April 28, 1971.

While the signing of the OSH Act put into law the effort to regulate the health and safety of the U.S. workforce, the roots of workplace safety and health in the U.S. go back to before the 20th century. In the decades leading up to the passage of the OSH Act workplace industrial accidents and workplace exposures that lead to injuries, illnesses, and deaths among workers were all too common. Over the years, it became clearer that these issues could and should be addressed through research, education, prevention, mitigation, and regulation.

Since the signing of the OSH Act, much has changed with work, workplaces, and the workforce. Sadly, we continue to see the toll workplace injuries and illnesses take on the nation's workers. This past year has been no exception, with frontline and essential workers facing new threats from the pandemic. In many cases we have also seen the workplace change, as many are navigating how to do their jobs outside of the traditional workplace they once knew. Over the last year we have also seen how the pandemic has altered the way we work and live, intensified feelings of stress and emphasized the mental health aspects of occupational health and created uncertainty about the future for many people.

As we mark the 50th anniversary of NIOSH on Workers Memorial Day we take a moment to celebrate, to reflect, and to recommit. In the five decades since the passage of the OSH Act, NIOSH has grown. It is a testament to NIOSH's strong foundation in science and commitment to the health and safety of our nation's workers that we have become the organization we are today. As we celebrate this progress, we must also stop to reflect on the workers and families that continue to bear the burden of workplace illnesses, injuries, and deaths. And we must recommit ourselves to continuing to push forward in improving workplaces and work through our research and education, and continue to work with partners, employers, and workers to build an increasingly safer nation.

John Howard, MD, NIOSH Director

This blog is part of a [series](#) for the NIOSH 50th Anniversary. Stay up to date on how we're celebrating NIOSH's 50th Anniversary on our [website](#).

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Categories [50th Anniversary Blog Series](#), [Observances](#)

8 comments on “Workers Memorial Day 2021: Recognizing NIOSH’s First 50 Years”

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Dear Dr. Howard,

Thanks for these remarks and for the work of NIOSH over the past 50 years.

[Reply](#)

Congratulations on 50 years of service and a “BIG” thank you for keeping workers safe and for making sure we have a safe environment to work in!

[Reply](#)

Please don't forget that Dr. Marcus Key was the first NIOSH director in 1971 and brought great attention Occupational Medicine and hazards of asbestos, silica, vinyl chloride, coal dust, etc. He also helped develop the global standardization to the interpretation of pneumoconiosis chest x-rays with the NIOSH/ILO and Instituted the publishing the NIOSH Criteria documents. He was also my residency director at UT Houston, mentor, and colleague. He died in late 2020.

[Reply](#)

Thank you for your comment. Dr. Key was featured in a recent [blog on the NIOSH Directors](#)

In addition to the human toll the COVID-19 crisis has upended much of the economy and exposed glaring weakness in the US health care system and its ability to operate in a pandemic. This is at once apparent in the level of risks, infections and illness to those workers whose primary occupation is to care for the infected and the sick.

As discussion about rebooting the economy takes place its imperative that we rebuilt a robust pandemic planning and response system since that will be the critical domain where anticipated surges and revisits by COVID-19 [and also evolving new emerging infectious diseases will best be controlled]. If we get that right than downstream crises like those that have hit the meatpacking and nursing homes and other sectors may well be more effectively contained.

[Reply](#)

Excellent points! Thank you for your comment.

Congratulations to NIOSH on your first, impactful, fifty years, from your friends at the International Agency for Research on Cancer

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Thank you for your good wishes! We miss you!

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